

Politeja

No. 2(59), 2019, pp. 139-148

<https://doi.org/10.12797/Politeja.16.2019.59.09>**Roshni SENGUPTA** 

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DAUGHTERS OF TRAUMA

WOMEN AS SITES OF NATIONALISTIC APPROPRIATION IN PARTITION CINEMA

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to delineate and focus on the common narrative thread running through subsequent cinematic treatises on the situation of women during the Partition, particularly those kidnapped and sexually violated during the vivisection. It proposes to construct a cultural and memorialized history of the Partition through a reading of mediated representations of literary engagements with the event, particularly the narrativization of the cinematic trope of the ‘radicalized’ Muslim and his involvement in the abduction of “chaste” Hindu women during the cataclysmic event. In doing so it considers films such as *1947-Earth* (1999), *Pinjar* (2003), and *Khamosh Pani* (2003) as seminal films addressing female abductions during the Partition and the memorialization of trauma through cinema. The paper takes a feminist approach to addressing the question of the possession of the female body as the symbolic occupation of the nation.

Key words: Partition, feminist approach, memory, cinema, nation

INTRODUCTION

Several narrative strands – in the form of oral histories, literary engagements, and cultural representations – have emerged from the burning cinders of the Partition. One such strand encompasses the stories of women abducted during the great upheaval and their subsequent recovery and rehabilitation – some of them mere girls. Another explores the complete dehumanization of the ‘other’ leading to the -infliction of extreme violence on individuals and communities. Despite the momentous amount of written records, political histories, and memoirs of the Partition, a cultural historiography of the calamitous moment primarily emerges from the rich literary legacy of the subcontinent – the unnerving pathos of Saadat Hasan Manto’s stories *Khol Do*, *Mozelle*, *Thanda Gosht*, and *Hattak* and Amrita Pritam’s harrowing narrative in *Pinjar* being examples. A number of these literary engagements with the trauma and pain of the Partition have found resonance through mediated representations. Pritam’s novel was adapted for a film of the same name in 2008, preceded by the film adaptation of Bapsi Sidhwa’s searing *Cracking India*, known also as *Ice-Candy Man – 1947-Earth* – in 1998. Both films mirrored the darkness of *Tamas* (1988) – the televised form of Bhisham Sahani’s epic novel – and Pamela Rooks’ *Train to Pakistan* (1998), adapted from Khushwant Singh’s eponymous novella. A number of cinematic treatises have subsequently attempted to capture the trauma of the great cleaving of people, recreating images of the voiceless subaltern – the victim of religious hate, bigotry and political maneuvering that led to violence, bloodshed and collective as well as individual suffering.

Theoretically, cinematic representations of the traumas of the past lead to the creation of collective memories about the historical specificities surrounding a particularly debilitating event or moment in history. Charu Mathur argues that since colonization and the struggle for independence, culminating in the Partition, was the most sweeping reality that India faced in the 19th and 20th century, a number of films have been inspired by this phase of history.¹ Muslims being integral players in the freedom movement, two films, *Junoon* (1978) and *Pinjar*, made a quarter of a century apart engage in the depiction of the Muslim position with its cultural and ideological moorings to arrive at a realistic portrayal of the turbulent times. Based on novels, both films examine India’s tragic and blood-soaked journey towards independence.

The key to our discussion here – concerned primarily with the popular visual medium – is the question of how vision is constructed. How we see, are able to, allowed to, made to see, or even socialized to see and in the seeing, what are we instead unseeing remains the central premise of visibility. The scopic regime – a visual construction conforming to Western philosophical traditions – concerning the Muslim defines what is seen and how it is seen.² Visual images – and we live in the age of visual gluttony

¹ C. Mathur, “Muslims and the Freedom Struggle: Mobility in Captivity in *Junoon* and *Pinjar*”, in J. Jain (ed.), *Muslim Culture in Indian Cinema*, Jaipur 2011

² M. Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity”, in H. Foster (ed.), *Vision and Visuality*, Winnipeg 1999.

according to Donna Haraway³ – emerge as the primary sites of location of meanings. Roland Barthes analyzed cinema not for what it means or symbolizes but for how it almost succeeds in meaning-making itself. In this way, Barthes looks at categorized certain films as ‘full of significance’ without signification.⁴

The proliferation of discourse through cinematic narratives remains a frequent occurrence in most cultures around the world. John Cawelti delineates four major concepts that help in the study of popular culture – a) the analysis of cultural themes, b) the concept of medium c) the idea of myth and d) the concept of formula.⁵ Popular cinema embodies these concepts in no small measure, playing most provocatively on the idea of myth and employing the formula of structuring cultural products. It makes use of what Cawelti describes as the ‘game dimension,’ a formula wherein the story must be resolved. This, further, has two aspects: first, a patterned experience of excitement, suspense and release associated with entertainment and recreation; and second, the temporary resolution of frustration through escape and fantasy. The teleology of filmic representation, therefore, becomes expressly useful for attempting to understand the cultural contributions of cinema.

WOMEN IN PARTITION NARRATIVES

The cinematic representation of women during the Partition mirrors that of women in fiction narratives with Muslim male and Hindu female protagonists. The protests that erupted during and after the making of *Jodha Akbar* (2008) and *Padmavat* (2018) were primarily aimed at the portrayal of Muslim males in conjugal situations with Hindu females thereby invoking the image of the occupation of the Hindu nation by the Muslim invader. The Hindu right believes in empowering the Hindu female body to fight the war of patriotism against the Muslim combatant.⁶ The significant place that the myth of Muslim lust occupies within the general mythology of Hindu communalism also explains the need for self-strengthening. The recurrent oral myth of militant Hinduism is the imagery of a Muslim criminal raping a Hindu girl in front of her husband. The frequent reference to the “*swasangrakhshanksham nari*” (a woman who can defend herself) also lend credence to the perpetuation of the myth of a sexually aggressive Muslim male.⁷ There is no better canvas to represent this violence than a Partition film.

³ G. Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, 4th edition, Oxford 2016.

⁴ R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris 1970.

⁵ J.W. Cawelti, *Mystery, Violence, and Popular Culture*, Madison, Wis. 2004.

⁶ T. Basu *et al.*, “VHP: Organizing Mass Communalism”, in T. Basu, *Khaki Shorts, Saffron Flags: A Critique of the Hindu Right*, New Delhi 1993.

⁷ P. Bacchetta, “Hindu Nationalist Women as Ideologues: The ‘Sangh’, the ‘Samiti’ and their Differential Concepts of the Hindu Nation”, in C. Jaffrelot (ed.), *The Sangh Parivar: A Reader*, New Delhi 2005.

British writers in India perpetuated a repertoire of such images, construing Indian Islam as an emblem of repellent “otherness”, the *faith of a body of savage marauders and conquerors, who swept over the land...and in a series of cruel raids, bringing rapine and destruction in their train*⁸, says William Crooke in his book, *The North Western Provinces of India. Most Indian Mussalmans* – comments Sidney Low (1907) in his work, *A Vision of India* – *cherished in their hearts some memory of the days when their fathers were the masters of India, and they believe, rightly or wrongly, that if ever the English power was shaken, they would regain their old dominance.*

The three films under scrutiny present narratives that foreground the violation of women’s bodies in conjunction with a symbolic occupation of the nation. The Hindu nationalist argument about women’s bodies being the site of the expression of national pride and honor undergirds the cinematic narratives of the films. Chandraprakash Dwivedi’s *Pinjar*⁹, adapted from the Punjabi novel by Amrita Pritam and set in August 1946 in undivided Punjab, represents the agony of a young Hindu woman abducted by a Muslim man during the communal frenzy of the Partition, the family’s subsequent denial of her, and the relative empowerment of the female protagonist as a hero of the times. *1947-Earth*, considered widely as Deepa Mehta’s Partition classic, also addresses the issue of abductions during the Partition, though in a perhaps more recalcitrant manner. The film is set in Lahore in 1947, a city experiencing the solidifying of communal identities like never before, and is narrated by Lenny, a nine-year-old Parsi child who lives in Lahore with her wealthy parents and is tended to by her Hindu ayah, Shanta. Ayesha, the protagonist of *Khamosh Pani*, seemingly amalgamates the visual traumas of both Puro in *Pinjar* and Shanta in *1947-Earth* and forms the temporal connection between the past – her abduction and rape during the Partition violence and her consequent marriage to one of the rapists – and the present as a Pakistani Muslim woman caught in the maelstrom of radicalism and fundamentalism in Pakistan. In an unwitting manner, the duality of her existence remains the mainstay of the visual imagery of the film as she struggles to come to terms with the scars of her past and the brute-force reality of the present, particularly in the form of her rapidly radicalizing son.

The narrative of *Pinjar* reflected – in more ways than one – the filmmaker’s appreciation of the ideological method of universalizing the inherently aggressive nature of the Muslim. The ideology of Hindu nationalism posits that the “other” not only threatens the pure bodies of Hindu women but in doing so exerts itself as a territorializing force over the Hindu nation as a whole. There is only one model for Muslim men and it is thoroughly negatively connoted. They are overwhelmingly depicted as rapists, rioters, and murderers in subsequent films on the Partition. It views not only Muslim men but also Islam as fundamentally and essentially degrading to women. The Hindu nationalists also construct the Muslim as impure and overtly sexual.

⁸ W. Crooke, *The North-Western Provinces of India: Their History, Ethnology and Administration*, Delhi (Reprint) [1897] 1975.

⁹ The film represents ten main characters, of which two are Muslim. One Muslim character could be categorized as a peripheral character.

The Muslim protagonist Rashid in *Pinjar* prevents a shocked and distraught Puro from jumping into the village well and marries her the next day, symbolic of the temporal movement of the woman from one life to the next – from a previous life as a happy young woman awaiting her wedding day, Puro is now the outcaste, having been abducted by a man, not only from another village but of another religion. Her family turns their backs on the girl who has been touched by a Muslim, and hence defiled and despoiled forever. The shunning of Puro by her family is justified by the narrative of *Pinjar* as resulting from the consciousness of violence existing between Hindus and Muslims at the time of Partition.

In the film, the Partition takes on the force of a natural disaster, an anomaly in the face of the customary unity and camaraderie that mark the daily lives of common people. *Pinjar*, presumably a testimonial to the travails of the forgotten woman victims of Partition, the true “wretched of the Earth”¹⁰ (Fanon, 1967), rebuked and rebuffed by their families, and sucked inadvertently into the vortex of the violence that marked the vivisection of the Indian sub-continent, attempts to reconcile temporal dislocation with the trauma of physical violation. After her marriage to Rashid, Puro is rechristened Hamida, a name that is tattooed on her arm – the hapless woman frantically attempting to rub the name away to no avail. The complete temporal shift occurs as Hamida gives up yearning for release.

The historical discourse is depicted through four separate yet interconnected strands of representation. Firstly, the Muslim protagonist remains the centerpiece of the revenge drama being played out on screen as he remains defiant in his resolve to avenge his family’s honor allegedly brought to disrepute by the Hindu moneylender. Secondly, as the aggressive, Muslim male transforms into a mature husband, he remains constantly traumatized by the gravity of his own action, abducting and then forcing himself on a helpless woman. Thirdly, the Hindu woman, forced into making a temporal journey between her previous life and the next, accepts her fate and attempts to prevent the same from befalling a female relative. Lastly, the traumatized Hindu women abandoned by her family to keep dishonor at bay appears to find solace in the arms of her abductor and tormentor.

Rashid, now playing the role of a caring husband who despite suffering the pain of unrequited love, respects the woman’s decision to abstain from any conjugal relations with him. This is the point at which *Pinjar* – more in line with Amrita Pritam’s eponymous story, posits a complete antithesis to the Hindu right’s discourse on the violation of Hindu women by wanton Muslim men. Although *Pinjar* can still be accused of an ideological bias, replete as the film is with sequences where the Muslim is the aggressor and the Hindus (or Sikhs) the victims, the characterization of Rashid is a source of subliminal atonement for the narrative. Not only does Rashid carry the burden of history on his shoulders, he ultimately proves to be the rock against which Puro leans when confronted with a difficult choice—whether to cross the border into Hindustan with her brother Trilok and Ramchand, her fiancé who waits to take her back despite her

¹⁰ F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, London 1967.

abduction and subsequent marriage to a Muslim, or remain with the man who is now her husband, the force behind – as Puro discovers – the reunion of Trilok and his wife, Lajo (also abducted and raped by a Muslim for days).

In what appears as an intriguing paradigm shift, somewhere along the narrative of the film *Puro* – or *Hamida* – begins to see herself as the keeper of the home and hearth of her Muslim “husband” and not the abductor. As the film would have us believe, Puro has reconciled to her fate as the wife of a Muslim peasant, someone who has stopped fighting it and given up hope of going back to her previous life. The woman even begins to respond to her husband as he addresses her while going about household chores, lending a melancholy quality to their relationship. The seemingly and supposedly “natural gift” possessed by women to be able to successfully make adjustments to their lives is vested in the person of Puro. Countless accounts of female abductions during Partition tell the stories of women raped and married several times till they come to a settled conclusion over their predicament. In her recounting of the collective trauma of Partition, Urvashi Butalia emphasizes the “women that both India and Pakistan forgot”.

Puro’s character in *Pinjar* is further symbolic of the power structures as they existed (and continue to exist) in rural India, particularly Punjab. The settlement of family disputes by abducting women from each other’s clans remains the fundamental focus of the narrative of the film. Further, the continuation of such an inhumanity even to the early period of the 20th century becomes apparent as the film progresses. The body of the woman, therefore, emerges as the battlefield over which clan and family battles are fought. Males, hungry for power and revenge not only ravage and violate the woman’s body but vivisection and destroy her soul. The imagination of the revenge-seeking Muslim in *Pinjar* is predicated on the insult afflicted on the family and honor of the Muslim clan – the Sheikhs – as the Shah’s are said to have abducted and raped their women. Puro’s body – losing all vestiges of agency and choice – thus becomes merely a site for revenge, a literal zone of conflict between male protectors of family honor and pride.

The almost non-existent role of the women in safeguarding family pride and prestige is also significant in the reading of the film. Even as Puro becomes the victim of an age-old rivalry between two clans – brought to fruition against the rather convenient backdrop of communal violence related to Partition – her volition in the entire episode remains rudimentary and unexplained until she decides to help her sister-in-law escape the clutches of her abductor. The narrative seems to naturalize the pain and trauma of this woman as a mode of reconciliation. As she abets the escape of her female relative from the clutches of her abductor and rapist, she almost acquires an aura of inordinate strength. She has therefore finally accepted the company of her abductor-husband as she – in the climax of the film – refuses to part ways with him even as her fiancé and brother attempt to persuade her to leave for the Indian side. Not only has the body of the woman ultimately succumbed to patriarchy, it now stands as the symbol of the supreme sacrifice.

It is important also to consider the “cinematic historiography” posited by the narrative of *Pinjar*, so also *1947-Earth* and *Khamosh Paani*. Needless to say, the narrative

remains verbal fiction, particularly in view of the fact that the story is adapted from a fictional account loosely based on historically recorded events. Though the veracity of the same cannot be questioned, the depiction of characters and their actions through the narrative remain representations of the past and not the past itself. The impact of such representation on the audience might crucially and irrevocably be biased against the Muslim perpetrators of violence and therefore one-sided, on the one hand and even evoke sympathy for the repentance of the Muslim perpetrator, on the other.

The character of Dilnawaz, the ice-candy seller, in Deepa Mehta's *1947-Earth*¹¹, based on Pakistani novelist Bapsi Sidhwa's book originally titled *Cracking India* and subsequently changed to *The Ice Candy Man* is significant to our purposes. The film portrays Dilnawaz as the ideal companion – he is smart and intelligent and makes jokes about the worsening communal situation in the city. He considers his group of five friends, comprising the Hindu ayah, the Muslim butcher, the Hindu vegetable vendor and Hasan, the Muslim *malishwala* (masseur), who meet in the park everyday as the microcosm of the *Hindustan* of the future, where religions cohabit in harmony.

While this group of friends seems to be untouched by the communal frenzy engulfing large parts of undivided north India, the upper echelons of society in Lahore prepare for the impending division. Several related developments, therefore, bring to fore the nuances of a layered narrative. The deepening polarization irrevocably changes the group of protagonists driving a permanent communal wedge among them. Interestingly, the Muslim butcher is the most aggressive of the lot and makes plans to disrobe Hindus (and Sikhs) before killing them, while the Hindu vegetable vendor remains restrained, even frightened of the times ahead. While the Muslim is imagined as the more violent one, the Hindu is represented as timid and fearful. Further, the sexual proclivities of the male members of the group seemingly converges owing to the growing communal polarization and hatred. Several of the men, including the Muslim butcher and the Hindu vegetable vendor are sexually attracted to Shanta, Lenny's Hindu ayah. Therefore, it would appear rather fastidious to extrapolate Dilnawaz's actions at the climax of the film as those of a radicalized Muslim – he seems to embody the true spirit of the jilted lover attempting to exact revenge, more than anything else. The narrative, however, manages to collapse sexual rejection and rising communal hatred into one inseparable whole. The events in the film are seen through the impressionable eyes of a nine-year-old for whom the group of protagonists act in strange ways in a radically changed atmosphere.

Dilnawaz's transformation, from a man known for his jocular personality and his intense attraction towards Shanta, into one drawn into the communal vortex, is represented as a curious mix of circumstances where he is exposed, on the one hand, to the harsh reality of Shanta being in love with Hasan, his arch rival for her attentions, when he witnesses them making passionate love in her quarters, and on the other, to the brutalized bodies of his sisters, whose breasts have been cut off, in the train coming into

¹¹ The film represents nine main characters, of which four are Muslim, the rest being Hindu and Parsi.

Lahore from Gurdaspur. Until then, he remains cautiously opposed to the spiraling violence, growing within the group of friends which includes Shanta.

The stoic resolve that Hasan carries through the film epitomizes the function of popular cinema to remain true to the egalitarianism embodied in the “good” Muslims. The character of a communal, rigid, and bigoted Muslim is set against that of a staunchly secular one, flexible in his orientation and worldview, and committed to upholding the virtues of peace. The characters of Rashid Sheikh (*Pinjar*) and Hasan are therefore illuminating. While Rashid’s shoulders seem rather burdened with the disposition of revenge despite his initial strong moral opposition to the act, Hasan remains committed to the union of souls not governed by the societal and political manifestations of religion and community.

The climax of the film could at best be described as a hurried justification of the primordially violent and revenge-seeking nature of the Muslim in popular visual narratives of the Partition. The sequence posits the secular Muslim in confrontation with the communal Muslim, where the communal Muslim emerges victorious over the secular. While it might appear to be in contrast to the climax sequence of *Pinjar*, where the reformed secular Muslim is placed on a high moral pedestal, the dialogic manifestations remain true to the general grain of cinematic portrayals of the great upheaval – the Muslim is ultimately held responsible for the violence.

The portrayal of the woman’s body as the site for dispute settlement and partition of land emerges as the point of focus in both film narratives. While Puro’s abductor makes her the object of atonement for a past event of sexual assault and humiliation, an entire mob of Muslim men presumably force themselves on Shanta after having publicly abducted her from her employer’s bungalow. It is here that we see the dismemberment of the souls of the two women, while the Partition remains a mute witness. Needless to say, the aggressors in both cases are Muslim males, thus evoking the imagery of the violent Muslim man violating chaste and pure Hindu women, in keeping with the dominant discourse of the resurgent Hindu right.

The third film under consideration in this paper is *Khamosh Paani* – an independent film not supported by government agencies in any way whatsoever as well as the outcome of the director’s research work on the women abductees of the Partition. Sabiha Sumar’s story of a Sikh woman abducted, raped and then married by one of her rapists, now living as Ayesha in Pakistan, represents several strands of any discussion on the portrayal of religious minorities in the cinema in general and sub-continental cinema in particular. To begin with, Ayesha’s sexual ordeal as a Sikh woman in the throes of the Partition illustrates her, in a terminal way, as a victim of Muslim rapists which remains perceptibly in the background of her present life as a middle-aged Muslim widow grappling with an intensely mundane and increasingly pragmatic existence. The duality of identities embodied by Ayesha presents her with an ephemeral, even iconic halo, unseen by those around her. Victimhood finally overwhelms religious identity in a remarkably stark climax sequence as Ayesha completes what she had almost been forced into many years ago just after being brutalized – she commits suicide by jumping into the well to assuage the fears of her son – fresh in the

clutches of extremists. Her ordeal as a Sikh in a past life appears to come full circle to consume her present.

The portrayal of Ayesha's Sikh brother, in Pakistan to search for his sister Veero abducted during the Partition, is evidence of nuance and sensitivity in the treatment of characters in the film, particularly when read as a visual text. His insistence on addressing her as Veero (and not Ayesha) predicates a pining for the past, subsuming in itself a larger mosaic of sentimentality borne out of individual and collective trauma. The narrative itself provides space for this sentimentality to attain fruition, thus advocating social as well as political justice for the victims of Partition and at the same time places the unambiguous reality of a spiral of violent radicalization in the foreground. The generalization of the narrative – Ayesha could have been a woman in post-Partition India – provides a wider location to the film.

Ayesha's climactic suicide further tends to rationalize the appropriation of the woman's body as a site of a nationalistic turf war. Not only does the representation address existing, primarily Hindu nationalistic narratives about the "excesses" of Partition perpetrated by the Muslims, it places a disproportionate responsibility on the woman to uphold the honor of the clan and nation. In foregrounding the futility of these hegemonic narratives, the three films under scrutiny provide a definitive critique of the appropriating tendency of extremist ideologies. The reduction of the Muslim as the narrative villain remains an integral part of the larger plot of representing the Hindu woman's body as a national symbol.

CONCLUSION

When viewed as a trope of political representation in cinema, the occupation of women's bodies during the Partition becomes a conceptual thread that runs through and connects the films, rearranging the relative ambiguity enveloping the development of the cinematic landscape as it emerged on both sides of the border. What appears to separate the narratives remains predicated on the portrayal of the Muslim villains of Partition. While *Pinjar* and *1947-Earth* presents a hegemonic and subliminal view of the abductors, *Khamosh Paani* makes a contextual break and portrays a nuanced reflection of the events as they unfold on screen. The film is also grounded in contemporary reality which unlike the two Indian films that almost seem to compete with each other for their space on the dominant, Hindu nationalist representational universe, making it both conceptually and affectively more sound.

The manner in which the woman survivor of the Partition is visualized must have also been examined through the narrative lens of the visibility of the Muslim. Two parallel visualities therefore exist – one that foregrounds the Muslim as the violator of Hindu women and the other that focuses on the plight of the women. Further, the need for the popular narrative to conclude logically – often vicarious owing to commercial interests – sets about a rearrangement of emotional tropes like: suffering, loss and guilt against an essentially political background story. For example, while the woman

abductee in *Pinjar* is – in the final assessment – represented as a sacrificial survivor, the Muslim abductor transforms from a guilt-ridden individual to an ally of the woman in her final quest for redemption.

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